

Mobile lives, screens and vision (I)

May 2015

The use of vision, like the other senses, has evolved alongside technological changes. How much have histories of this affected current trends, and what may this tell us about possible futures?



A distracted gaze

Mobile lives are increasingly played out in front of screens. Displays illuminate living

rooms, corridors, bars, cars, buses, metros, planes, waiting rooms and offices. Most of us also have a screen permanently attached to our person in the form of a smart phone or tablet. Intermittently but unfailingly our eyes are diverted towards a permanent flow of information, each one seemingly updating, or rather outdated, the information consumed earlier and momentarily interrupting the task at hand and punctuating daily activities. While conforming to a new imperative to communicate and 'to be informed', these new habits have also generated concern about the potential impact on work productivity (compulsion to check Twitter and Facebook in the workplace), intellectual capacity (shrinking memory) and social cohesion (self-absorbed indifference to travel companions). Some commentators speak of a crisis of attention. But is this dystopia of social disintegration the necessary outcome of a possible future of high-tech mobilities, and is this 'crisis' anything new?

Cultural historian Jonathan Crary has established interesting parallels between our time and the end of the nineteenth century in his book *Suspensions of Perception*. Organised around a discussion of three paintings by Manet (above), Seurat and Cezanne, produced between 1879 and 1900, the book discusses how then, as now, there was a perceived crisis of attention. Again, mirroring today, this was related to social, urban, and industrial environments being increasingly saturated with new sensory stimuli. And then as now mobility and novelty were identified as the key constitutive elements of new perceptual experience. Crary notes how at the end of the nineteenth century even advocates of the new technologies acknowledged that human adaptation to this brave new world, with its unprecedented perceptual speeds and sensory overload would not proceed altogether smoothly. And yet, implicit in this belief was the assumption that modernization was a one-off set of changes to which vision would eventually adjust after an unsettled period of transition. But hindsight only shows us that modernization was, and remains, an on-going process, never pausing to allow for the individual to keep up. Often seen as an expression of pathological disintegration, this gap between the rhythm of change and the capacity for perceptual adaptation reveals a deep and ongoing transformation in the relationship between a subject and their visual field. Vision (or any other sense) is never stable then, but is constantly in the process of adapting to the ever-changing structures of life. In elaborating this point Crary notes that 'what we familiarly refer to as film, photography and television are transient elements within an accelerating sequence of displacements and obsolescences (delirious operations of modernization).'

Added to this historical rooting, for Crary the proliferation of screens forms part of what the French intellectual Guy Debord describes as the *Society of Spectacle*. 'Spectacle' does not refer to the act of looking at images or the hegemony of vision in everyday life, but to the development of technologies that 'individuate, immobilize and separate subjects, even

within a world where mobility and circulation are ubiquitous.' We live, Crary argues, under the logic of the spectacle which 'prescribes the production of separate, isolated but not introspective individuals.' This analysis resonates with observations by earlier commentators, such as Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin who analysed modernity in terms of experiences of distraction. However, for Crary modern distraction refers not so much the disruption of pre-existing integral or more 'natural' forms of perception, but to the effect of attempts to discipline attention. While critics bemoan the negative effects of these new technologies on work productivity, the individual also faces constant enticements for organized distraction (through film, television and new media). In light of this cultural double bind, for Crary the biggest loss in this process is the capacity for daydreaming. This is obviously a pessimistic analysis. Yet a forthcoming entry in this blog will present research that suggests that the proliferation of screens is not necessarily weakening our sociability.

Painting

Edouard Manet, *In the Conservatory*, 1879.

Reference

Cary, J. 1999. *Suspensions of Perception. Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, The MIT Press.

Debord, G. (1968) *The Society of Spectacle*. New York, Zone Books.